The New York Times

Founded in 1851

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National Security, Politicized

The National Security Revitalization Act may have seemed like good politics when Republicans pushed it as part of their Contract With America. But as approved by the House yesterday it is bad policy, and should be rejected by the Senate.

The legislation imposes drastic restrictions on American participation and funding for United Nations peacekeeping activities, mandates early NATO expansion into Eastern Europe and creates a Congressionally dominated commission on national security strategy. Some of its most extreme language was watered down in committee, and its original call for an early revival of a Star Wars-type missile defense system was turned back by the full House. What remains is a direct challenge to the foreign policy powers of the Presidency, and the principles of both the Clinton and Bush Administrations' national security strategy.

The bill establishes a 12-member commission, 8 to be named by Congress and 4 by the White House, to review "the long-term national security needs of the United States." There is nothing wrong with Congress examining this question, but the commission is a brazen grab by the Republican Congressional leadership for authority that belongs in the executive branch.

Another provision calls for early admission of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to NATO. Actual admission, which carries a guarantee to go to war to defend any member that comes under attack, can only be decided by the member countries of NATO.

The bill makes a hash of the politically sensitive issue of American troops serving under foreign command in joint military actions. In combat operations, American troops are always under the direct authority of the Commander in Chief as well as overall American military command. But the House bill makes it difficult for American units to serve under foreign officers anywhere in the chain of command. This draws the wrong lesson from Somalia, where American troops got into trouble while operating under American command, and ignores the successes of joint command in the Persian Gulf coalition.

The bill's most impractical provision would count the cost of so-called voluntary contributions to U.N. peacekeeping operations against Washington's annual peacekeeping dues. These range from the costs of specialized equipment donated to peacekeepers in Cambodia to American military operations for which Washington has obtained a U.N. bles ...g, like the invasion of Haiti. Deducting the Cambodia contributions is reasonable. Subtracting the costs of the Haiti invasion is not, and could easily create a situation where the world's richest country ended up paying nothing at all to the U.N.'s peacekeeping budget.

The right answer is to recognize that most "voluntary" peacekeeping operations have little to do with peacekeeping as normally understood, and should require explicit authorization by Congress and be paid for out of the normal Pentagon budget.

Despite a number of exceptions theoretically permitting the President to override its most onerous restrictions, the bill would make it all but impossible for the President to pursue a coherent national security policy. Senate moderates of both parties should amend or defeat it. If they fail, President Clinton should veto it, as promised.